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# CREATION, METAPHYSICS, AND ETHICS

David B. Burrell

This essay explores the ways in which specific attention (or lack thereof) to creation can affect the manner in which we execute metaphysics or ethics. It argues that failing to attend to an adequate expression of "the distinction" of creator from creatures can unwittingly lead to a misrepresentation of divinity in philosophical argument. It also offers a suggestion for understanding "post-modern" from the more ample perspective of Greek and medieval forms of thought.

As the immodest title suggests, these "big-picture" reflections propose to trace ways in which prevailing forms of thought can effectively distort inquiries in philosophical theology, precisely by systematically eliminating any reference to the grounding fact of creation. This attempt to bring to consciousness what can easily remain presumed was itself inspired by observing the affinities which some dimensions of "post-modern" thought display with medieval perspectives. My own work on the way in which Aquinas transformed Hellenic metaphysics (with help of Avicenna and Maimonides) in the presence of a free creator suggests that it might be illuminating to remind ourselves how much modern philosophy has been expressly post-medieval. That is, "creatures" had now to be autonomous, while the relation between human persons and God became extrinsic, as exemplified in a "divine command" ethics. Now conceived as a being preceding in existence and continuing in existence alongside some other entity called "the universe," God could not but be a threat to human beings. Once "God" was so transmuted, creation would be conceived as this God acting on, or "actualizing," possibilities, conceived in some sense to "be there" already. Profiting by what I take to be an inevitable rejection of these features of modernity, I want to construct a narrative showing how some features of that rejection serve to highlight a medieval set of perspectives, and may even allow us to retrieve them to our profit. In that respect, this exercise reflects a continuing concern to unseat Hegelian presumptions endemic to any "history of philosophy" narrative. It is worth reminding ourselves at the outset that medievals cannot be simply identified with a classical view: the new factor (for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike) is of course a free creator. Nor does it seem that any return to a classical view (with its "robust realism") is possible. Yet retrieving a full set of medieval



perspectives would demand a “leap of faith”—at the very least to an intentional creator—and one can hardly ask that of philosophers.

One could, however, try to inform them what that amounts to; yet that will not be easy either, since it will entail deconstructing the post-medieval (or modern) version, which sought to explicate a world independent of its internal relation to its creator, resulting in the modern image of the creator as something over against or alongside the universe: indeed, the “biggest thing around.” Yet for us, who may well all be “post-modern” descriptively, “following our intuitions” regarding such matters may still be to settle into those modern grooves where the relation of the universe to God is an extrinsic one.<sup>1</sup> So once again, the role of comparative work in philosophy or in theology will be to remind us of the myopia of “our intuitions” on most any matter; and here differences in time (history) work as well as differences in space (culture), unless of course, Hegel’s mindset has effectively rendered the past *past*, or modernity’s prejudices about the superiority of western culture have inoculated us against learning anything from “others.” Here it is our unconscious predilections which we must examine: the things we don’t feel any compunction to read, perhaps because we already know how to think about such things, or our settled convictions about what a *philosophical* account should look like. It is this presumptive, or relatively unconscious, dimension which leads us to speak of “our intuitions,” so exposing that will require a form of argument which is best termed “rhetorical”, since mounting straightforward arguments will inevitably invoke those very “intuitions” which I am calling into question—like an extrinsic relation of creator to creation, should we even speak of a creator.<sup>2</sup>

Since I prefer to deconstruct in a constructive fashion, however, I shall try to accomplish both tasks in one by expounding the relation of creator to creatures in a way designed to show how different is the medieval view, thereby exposing the inadequacies of modern renderings of “theism.” In that way, we post-moderns can have a fair view of what Jews, Christians, or Muslims actually accept on faith, by explicating the rich traditions which each of these faiths embodies. We shall see how utterly crucial is the asseveration that the universe is freely created by one God, as well as the ways in which that article of faith is variously explicated in each tradition so as to converge on a metaphysical account of the creator as the cause of being. The characteristics such a cause must possess will serve to identify the creator uniquely, and lead us to characterize the things we encounter as creatures. Even more, as Robert Sokolowski reminds us, the universe itself is transformed from the merely *given* context for our thought and discourse when it is understood “as that which might not have been. The world and everything in it is appreciated as a gift brought about by a generosity that has no parallel in what we experience in the world. The existence of the world now prompts our gratitude, whereas the being of the world prompts our wonder”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the very notion of *contingency* is radicalized: “it is not just that things could have been very different from the way they are; we are now able to speak of things, and of the whole, as possibly not having been at all” (32). Yet this notion is so radical that it is hardly accessible without that of a free creator: “the thought that things generally, and we ourselves, might not have existed is bearable—bearable not just

emotionally but as a conceivability—only against the other term of this distinction, the term that must be so understood that even if nothing else did exist, there would be no diminution of excellence” (32). So the universe and God cannot be construed as we construe two objects within the universe; to realize this is to

begin to appreciate the strangeness of the distinction itself. In the distinctions that occur normally within the setting of the world, each term distinguished is what it is precisely by not being that which it is distinguishable from. Its being is established partially by its otherness, and therefore its being depends on its distinction from others. But in [this] distinction God is understood as ‘being’ God entirely apart from any relation of otherness to the world or to the whole. ... No distinction made within the horizon of the world is like this, and therefore the act of creation cannot be understood in terms of any action or any relationship that exists in the world. The special sense of sameness in God ‘before’ and ‘after’ creation, and the special sense of otherness between God and the world, impose qualifications on whatever we are to say about God and the world, about creation out of nothing, about God’s way of being present and interior to things and yet beyond them. All the names [i.e., terms] and syntax we use for such theological discourse have to be adapted from their normal use in the element of the identities and differences within the world (32-33).

David Braine has worked out the implications of such a “distinction” for understanding both creator and creation in his *Reality of Time and the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). And in doing so, he is clear regarding what needs to be deconstructed:

Unless ideas of time and causation are so developed as to exclude [it], even the conception of God as cause of existence out of nothing is still compatible with thinking of God as a finite being preceding in existence and continuing in existence alongside some other entity called the Universe—compatible with giving no adequate explanations of God’s ‘infinity’ and ‘eternity’ so that to use these terms remains mere rhetoric. A demiurge does not need to be simple, eternal, or infinite, except in name, nor even unique. By contrast, if we recognize that temporal or successive existence is in itself of such a nature that nothing with temporal existence is capable either of giving rise to it from nothing or of causing its continuance, and recognize that all temporal things are equally impotent in this respect, whether in regard to themselves or in regard to other things, then we shall discover that we have arrived at a valid basis for asserting a genuine infinity and a radical eternity to God (16).

Both Braine and Sokolowski are insisting that the proper use of expressions like ‘infinite’ and ‘eternal’ belongs to the semantic domain established by the creator/creature relation. So their paradigmatic use *in divinis* cannot be construed as naming *properties* which we could understand outside that

unique relationship. (See Aquinas' argument [in ST 1.10.3] that "'eternity', in the true and proper sense, belongs to God alone.") The wary reader armed with appropriately modern skills will begin to detect a circularity here, and may be prompt to name it "fideism." For both of these philosophers are concerned to delineate a grounding relation which itself depends on asserting the universe to be freely created out of nothing, by a creator whose perfection is in no way enhanced by the act of creating, so that it must be thoroughly gratuitous. Yet while Braine executes a sustained argument to this conclusion (sketched in outline in the citation given), and so counters any charge of "fideism," Sokolowski is rather concerned to show the meaningfulness of such discourse, given the faith-assertion of free creator. Can that be called "fideism"? Not, I would suggest, in any reprehensible meaning of that term, for he is not insisting on the *truth* of the framework he introduces.

Indeed the upshot of our inquiry should help us see that any ready use of the term 'fideism' will inevitably embody those modernist presumptions about *faith* and about *reason* that we are putting to question here, so its very use should invite further questions. In fact, the postmodern climate into which we have been transported seems to facilitate our recognizing faith as a mode of knowing. And if that be the case, we will be able to appreciate John Paul II's statement that "at the deepest level, the autonomy which philosophy enjoys is rooted in the fact that reason is by its nature oriented to truth," recognizing how it derives from faith in creation. That same faith also emboldens him to insist that "a philosophy conscious of this as its 'constitutive status' cannot but respect the demands and the data of revealed truth."<sup>4</sup> It will be the burden of our inquiry to show how such a statement will inevitably sound paradoxical to us, given the presuppositions with which we initially hear it. And it is those very presuppositions, of course, which emerge in any appeal we may make to "our intuitions" about these critical matters.

Jaakko Hintikka has recently offered a trenchant diagnosis of the practice of "present-day analytic philosophers ... to appeal to intuitions" (note 1), comparing it usefully to the way Aristotle employs "*endoxa* [opinions] or *prima facie* intuitions [as] raw material to be critically weighed, corrected, and integrated into a coherent view. Their presuppositions have to be uncovered and their tacit limitations recognized before such an integration is possible. [Indeed,] this is what most of Aristotle's own philosophical argumentation amounts to" (138-9). He goes on to underscore the goal of this effort: "Such a critical scrutiny of our *prima facie* intuitions typically amounts to re-educating our *endoxa* so as to do better justice to the realities of the conceptual situation." This will prove to be especially needed when the language in question is imbedded in the practice of faith communities over time, where the general weakness Hintikka's notes becomes a glaring deficiency: "one of the most crucial failures of contemporary philosophers has been that they have not realized the need of re-educating and re-regimenting even some of their most sacred intuitions" (139). Hintikka traces current penchant of philosophers to rely on their intuitions to Chomsky's "appealing to grammatical intuitions" in linguistics (132). Whatever the

merit of this diagnosis, Hintikka makes a crucial distinction when he judges "Chomsky's reliance on intuitions [to be] a better tactic than philosophers' parallel ploy," noting that "linguists' intuitions pertain to the human language ability and its products [while] philosophers' intuitions do not pertain to the supposed faculty of intuition itself but to the truths about which this faculty is supposed to provide knowledge" (133-4).

Grappling with Hintikka's criticisms could prove a useful propaedeutic for philosophers to engage the reflections which follow here, as would a sensitivity to Foucault's exposé of the "conceptual formations" [*episteme's*] within which we invariably work. In matters pertaining to divinity, however, whoever recognizes how crucial it is that "the distinction" obtain between creator and creatures will insist that our very "language ability" will have to be re-educated to reflect this distinguishing feature of Abrahamic discourse.<sup>5</sup> In fact, that is precisely what liturgical and related practices of faith-traditions are constantly engaged in effecting. So "our intuitions" in this domain will be doubly suspect, in terms of Hintikka's useful distinction, and be so for believers as well as unbelievers, since (as Kierkegaard reminds us in speaking of Christianity) one cannot be said to *be* a person of faith so much as (at best) *becoming* one.<sup>6</sup> Aquinas' way of incorporating what Kierkegaard calls "the infinite qualitative difference" and Sokolowski "the distinction" is to insist that the expressions we use to identify and name God will (at best) "imperfectly signify" their divine "object."<sup>7</sup> So the mystagogy which incorporates believers into a faith-tradition will have to incorporate ways of *showing* that the God spoken of—for Jews, Christians or Muslims—cannot be an object in or even over against the universe of objects. Yet since our language is tailored to just such objects, the very use of our language in these domains will have to strain against its ordinary use. Aquinas was able to capitalize on an acute awareness of the various senses of scripture, cultivated in the century preceding him, to introduce a sense for analogous usage endemic to our ordinary language and yet further enhanced by this twelfth-century appreciation of the elasticity of scriptural references. Yet Hans Frei has shown (in his now classic *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*) how an empiricist world view succeeded in impoverishing our sense of language and of scriptures, generating many conundra which lacked any "feel" for the specificities of biblical description.

To be reminded of such matters, however, is bound to be unsettling to anyone—philosopher or not—whose view of the universe would *exclude* such biblical or Qur'anic specificities, so the appeal to "our intuitions" will often have a persuasive or rhetorical edge, designed precisely to foreclose anything which our language could at best "imperfectly signify." So also will my attempt to expose such rhetorical ploys perforce employ a counter-rhetoric, yet consciously so. More constructively, one of the ways in which we set about to re-educate our *prima facie* intuitions about things is to test them against the bar of other cultures, across both time and space. One of the advantages of learning another language or immersing oneself in another culture is to come to appreciate that doing things differently from the way we do could serve to open us to richer human possibilities. In short, we come to see that "our intuitions" about many things are too restrictive. Indeed, reading a philosopher writing from another set of pre-

suppositions should jar us to become aware of our own. For example, when Aquinas states serenely that God can move the will freely, the statement cannot but sound paradoxical to us. Yet as we tease out the theorems relevant to making such a statement we will begin to see why, in this unique case of creator with creature (ST 1.111.2), “there is no contradiction between being moved of one’s own accord—[the hallmark of free action]—and being moved by another” (ST 1.105.4.2), since this Other “moves our will as the universal mover to the universal object of will, which is the Good. And without this universal motion, [we] cannot will anything” (ST 1-2.9.6.3). The ‘as’ here offers an analogy building on statements of Plato and Aristotle; it is not intended as a description of how this activation takes place. What the analogy assures, however, is that the movement will not be forced, since it is in line with the inbuilt tendency of creatures to return to their creator, rather than opposed to it.

Rather than infer (as some have) that Aquinas must be a determinist, we could ask ourselves whether he might not be construing this unique relationship of creator to creatures in ways which escape us, and even move on to ask what factors might be present in our intellectual environment to facilitate that escape. And since the creator/creature relationship shapes everything in this domain, confronting such texts could make us inquire whether our presumptions regarding the agencies involved—divine and human—have sufficiently attended to the unique founding relationship of creation, indeed of free creation. This essay makes bold to identify those presumptions as they function in metaphysics and ethics—indeed at the juncture of these two philosophical domains. We shall highlight certain presumptions as symptomatic of our inability to conceive the creator/creature relation, and often enough of an outright denial of any such relationship. It may prove illustrative, however, to show how such denials often result from misconceiving that relation, usually in ways which pit creator against creature in a zero-sum game. As is invariably the case, “atheisms” can often be diagnosed as reaction-formations to a “theism” whose formulations effectively betray the reality and mystery of divinity. These formulations can lead theists to construct complex “solutions” to the “problems” such misconceptions have generated, while the cumulative effect of contrived defenses of an unworthy divinity may impel others into an “atheism” which leaves them bereft of the resources the creator/creature relation can offer.

Here much postmodern scepticism offers us an illuminating retrospective on the modern attempt to function bravely without a creator whose very presence seemed to compromise human effort. Although it took a few centuries for the results to emerge, it has now become problematic whether the very notion of *author* can be coherent in the absence of a creator, as George Steiner has cogently argued.<sup>8</sup> Similarly for the *self* which had been conceived as the juncture point between spiritual and material worlds, yet became the hallmark of a humanity conceived as the pinnacle of the world as it presents itself to humans to be known and thence to be improved to meet our needs. That very *self* becomes problematic as its vaunted knowledge transmutes into a power which threatens the quality of human life, if not its very survival. Moreover, since that same *self* was also regarded as the touchstone of a humane ethic, we have been visited

with the consequences of its virtual demise when the absence of any inbuilt orientation to a founding and transcendent *good* fails to underwrite the dignity of human beings in the face of the violence endemic to overwhelming power—whether exercised overtly in systematic campaigns of “ethnic cleansing,” or covertly by massive economic domination. Absent the background conception (shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike) of human beings “created in the image and likeness of God,” with the resultant inbuilt orientation to a *good* which addresses all to invite each to become what they are called to become, human freedom is reduced to a plethora of choices, notably more abundant to the more affluent, with no recognizable goal for human activity. An initial euphoria at no one’s being able to “impose” such goals on us gives way before long to an inescapable query regarding the relative worth of the choices facing us, which re-introduces the *telos* as a question. When that recurrent query is met with the dogmatic assertion that goals too are a matter of choice, an astute respondent might wonder whether that framework is not being “imposed.” Yet we shall see how such a view results directly from having to deny that we are creatures internally related to a creator. Yet to complete the circle, we shall also see how such a denial was facilitated by conceiving that relation to be external rather than internal, for a creator alongside the universe would have to be dispensed with: metaphysically, for the sake of parsimony, and ethically to obviate heteronomy.

### *Metaphysics of such Matters*

The sinuous, often labyrinthine, effects of denying the creator/creature relationship, evident in so much postmodern literature, should alert us to the inherent difficulty in conceiving that relation. Yet here we receive assistance from another dimension of postmodern sensibility, which can open us, in the spirit of Gadamer, to appreciate how faith (as embodied in a self-critical faith-tradition) can be a mode of knowing. For classical efforts to “prove the existence of God” as a *preamble* to faith can now be seen to have functioned properly only in a milieu of faith. David Braine’s efforts, for example, in his recent *Reality of Time and the Existence of God*, turn on an appreciation of the “novelty of existence,” which makes one look to a creator to assure anything’s continuing to exist; yet one might wonder whether the ground of such an appreciation in a robust distinction between *essence* and *existing* was not itself prepared by a background belief in free creation. As Gadamer has reminded us, however, such an apparent circularity may in fact be more natural than vicious, just as we have come to appreciate how much trust the exercise of reason presupposes. (Indeed, John Paul II’s recent proposal that faith offers the best defense of reason does not sound so strange to contemporary ears as it would have seemed to a Voltaire, for we have become used to complaints that we have “lost our faith in reason,” a phrase ostensibly oxymoronic to modernist ears.) So we should be prepared to recognize a relationship between faith and reason as internal as that between other presuppositions which we bring to our inquiries, as well as the conclusions we explicitly draw from them. Indeed, even more so in matters of faith, for while any set of presupposi-



tions constitutes an horizon for inquiry, faith-traditions ask us to advert more consciously to the horizon offered, since it explicitly outstrips our ordinary perceptions. As Robert Sokolowski reminded us in presenting "the distinction" of creator from creatures, the universe emerges from that *distinction* as a new kind of whole only conceivable "against the other term of this distinction" (32), a free creator. Yet since a free creator is a matter of faith, he also insists that "the distinction is glimpsed on the margin of reason; [indeed] at the intersection of reason and faith" (39). Yet Sokolowski's recurring reminders of the singularity of this "distinction" should alert us to the ease with which we can find ourselves assimilating it to an ordinary one in which the two terms—God and universe—will be unwittingly conceived as two items within the universe itself. This can take place imperceptibly, even in efforts to exalt God as, say, the "necessary being" who thereby "exists in all possible worlds." This formula succeeds in setting God off from all other beings, yet does so in a way which relies on the ordinary distinction of such beings among themselves, and without a hint of the constitutive creator/creature relation.

Yet if that very relation is tolerable only within the context of revelation, as Sokolowski suggests, David Braine reminds us how such a "revelation needs the concept of a being which is underivative, but whose underivativeness is not just *de facto* but intrinsic, arising from a difference in the way this being possesses existence, a difference setting it apart from all creatures and rendering it incapable of having a cause: it has to exist 'of itself' without causing its own existence" (348). And he offers yet another diagnosis of potential blockage to such an understanding of the creator: "Meantime, models of the relation of God and the world derived from post-Cartesian understandings whereby mind and body stood in parallelism or interactive relationships had invited an anthropomorphic modeling of God's relation to the World either upon an interactionist basis or upon a deistic or 'strong predestinationist' picture within which God's decrees established everything at the beginning. But such a parallelism is at once excluded by the non-finite or incomparable nature of God involved in His incompositeness: His immediacy is not that of a coeval co-finite being but that of a root of temporal continuance transcending time" (352). So a proper conception of the relation between creator and creatures will entail a proper conception of God, yet since in the Abrahamic framework that means the One who originates all that is, the two conceptions are strictly correlative. And if Braine is correct (as I contend he is, referring those interested to his careful reasoning), properly conceiving the relation between creator and creatures will entail conceiving a being whose very nature is to-be, and is in that radical sense incomposite. Yet since such a conception will have to be radically negative, the same must be said for the relation of that One to all that is. But if that be the case, how can we possibly proceed in philosophical theology?

Very carefully, I would suggest, as porcupines are purported to do. Yet as Socrates reminded us, *unknowing* should be a preferred strategy for approaching many significant things in life, like a society's learning how to welcome its handicapped members, or our welcoming those whom the dominant society regards as deviant and so would do its best to explain

away. Indeed, whenever we sense that a strategy of *explanation* amounts to explaining away facts purportedly “inexplicable” to us, wisdom will dictate a strategy of unknowing. So any theology worthy of its name will have to acquire and display appropriately *negative* strategies. Yet as the current postmodern climate forcibly reminds us, this challenge is hardly *fach*-specific to philosophical theologians, for attempts to circumvent that entire domain leave us with more negation than elation. What then are the costs and benefits of retrieving a medieval mindset? The ostensible costs entail developing a keen appreciation for the symbolic dimensions of discourse, which a unilateral focus on “arguments” can easily suppress. Symbolic discourse, disciplined to identify and exploit paradigm instances, becomes properly analogous language which we can then use to refer to that term of the *distinction* which is the source of all. For such a One will have to *be* in such a way that its being need not be caused yet it will be the source of anything else that is. So, as Anselm saw, it cannot *not* be, yet not merely as a “necessary being” which is a feature of any possible scenario, but rather as the source of anything else’s being at all.

Here is where the celebrated distinction of *essence* from *existing* enters philosophical discourse, for it first appeared as the attempt of an Islamic philosopher, Ibn Sina [Avicenna], to codify how this One from whom all-that-is emanates could be distinguished from everything else. That attempt foundered as he resorted to the distinction between *substance* and *accident* to identify *existing* as an “accident,” yet Aquinas would soon offer an alternative formulation which transformed Aristotle’s master categories of *potency* and *act* to locate *existing* as an *act*, indeed, the “act of acts.”<sup>9</sup> Since the very distinction of *essence* from *existing*, however, was born of an attempt to determine the relation of all-that-is to its necessarily existing source, we might ask whether a distinction so basic can even be perceived in the absence of affirming a creator, or whether this distinction is not the counterpart *in* creation of the master *distinction* of creator from creatures? My contention is that the two distinctions are internally related, although a phenomenological inquiry into the “novelty of existing” should serve to illuminate David Braine’s conclusion that “the positive existence of substances is an actuality and not just a fact” (156). And that, indeed, is the upshot of the celebrated distinction: that *existing* cannot be a feature of things, and so must play a unique predicative role.<sup>10</sup> Trying to discern what that role amounts to will carry us into logical domains similar to that which the master distinction of creator/creature introduces, so the two distinctions appear to be internally related; indeed, the essence/existing distinction offers a sign of the creator’s presence to and action in creation which alternatives accounts cannot but obscure<sup>11</sup>.

So how do those (like Aquinas) who recognize both distinctions, if not their inner linkage, characterize the master relation of creator to creatures? A perspicuous and suggestive treatment of this can be found in a comparative study of Aquinas and Sankara, presented in Sara Grant’s 1989 Teape lectures.<sup>12</sup> As she puts it:

In India as in Greece, the ultimate question must always be that of the relation between the supreme unchanging Reality and the world of

coming-to-be and passing away, the eternal Self and what appears as non-Self, and no epistemology can stand secure as long as this question remains unanswered. [It is indeed this startling contention which this essay has been exploring.] ... A systematic study of Sankara's use of relational terms made it quite clear to me that he agrees with St. Thomas Aquinas in regarding the relation between creation and the ultimate Source of all being as a *non-reciprocal dependence relation*; i.e., a relation in which subsistent effect or "relative absolute" is *dependent on its cause for its very existence as a subsistent entity*, whereas the cause is *in no way dependent on the effect for its subsistence*, though there is a *necessary logical relation between cause and effect*; i.e., a relation which is *perceived by the mind* when it reflects on the implications of the existence of the cosmos.

Her final observation about a "necessary logical relation" is quite compatible with regarding creating as a free action of the creator, for its import is intended to capture Aquinas' identification of "creation in the creature [as] nothing other than a relation of sorts to the creator as the principle of its existing" (ST 1.45.3). So the very existence [*esse*] of a creature is an *esse-ad*, an existing which is itself a relation to its source. Nothing could better express the way in which Aquinas' formulation of the essence/existing distinction transforms Aristotle than to point out that what for Aristotle "exists in itself" (substance) is for Aquinas derived from an Other in its very in-itselfness, or substantiality.<sup>13</sup> Yet since the Other is the cause of being, each thing which exists-to the creator also exists in itself: derived existence is no less substantial when it is derived from the One-who-is, so it would appear that one could succeed in talking of existing things without explicitly referring them to their source. "The distinction," in other words, need not *appear*. But that simply reminds us how unique a non-reciprocal relation of dependence must be: it characterizes one relation only, that of creatures to creator.

If creator and creature were distinct from each other in an ordinary way, the relation—even one of dependence—could not be non-reciprocal; for ordinarily the fact that something depends from an originating agent, as a child from a parent, must mark a difference in that agent itself. Yet the fact that a cause of being, properly speaking, is not affected by causing all-that-is does not imply remoteness or uncaring; indeed, quite the opposite. For such a One must cause in such a way as to be present in each creature as that to which it is oriented in its very existing. In that sense, this One cannot be considered as *other* than what it creates, in an ordinary sense of that term; just as the creature's *esse-ad* assures that it cannot *be* separately from its source.<sup>14</sup> So it will not work simply to contrast creation to emanation, or to picture the creator *distinct* (in the ordinary sense) from creation by contrast with a more pantheistic image. Indeed, it is to avoid such infelicities of imagination that Sara Grant has recourse to Sankara's sophisticated notion of *non-duality* to call our attention in an arresting way to the utter uniqueness of "the distinction" which must indeed hold between creator and creation, but cannot be pictured in any contrastive manner.<sup>15</sup> Nor does Aquinas feel any compunction at defining creation as the "emanation of all

of being from its universal cause [*emanatio totius entis a cause universali*]” (ST 1.45.1). Indeed, once he has emptied the emanation scheme of any mediating role, he can find no better way of marking the uniqueness of the causal relation of creation than using the term ‘emanation’ to articulate it.<sup>16</sup> For once the scheme has been gutted, that *sui-generis* descriptor should serve to divert us from imaging the creator over-against the universe, as an entity exercising causal efficacy on anything-that-is in a manner parallel to causation within the universe.<sup>17</sup> While the all-important “distinction” preserves God’s freedom in creating, which the emanation scheme invariably finesses, we must nevertheless be wary of picturing that distinction in a fashion which assimilates the creator to another item within the universe.<sup>18</sup>

*Participation*, rather than *concursus*, thus becomes the operative metaphor to describe the relation of creatures to the creator, as Rudi teVelde has shown so well (note 13). Harm Goris has shown how close attention to the uniqueness of the creator/creature relation, with its attendant corollary of *participation* as a way of articulating this *sui-generis* causal relation, can neutralize many of the cunundra found in the pages of *Faith and Philosophy*.<sup>19</sup> For all the ingenious efforts writers expend to adapt the causal analysis developed for interaction among created agents, they invariably side-step the metaphysical effort it takes to transform that apparatus in the face of the unique creator/creature relation. As a sign of this initial failing, ‘God’ is seldom referred to as ‘the creator’, but rather introduced as an agent among other agents, albeit more powerful, suggesting the caricature: “the biggest thing around.” As an unwitting verification of Aristotle’s observation that a small but significant mistake in the beginning becomes a monstrous one in the end, however, readers of such sophisticated adaptations will before long wonder what happened to the original question: God’s unique relation to the universe which God alone creates, and does so without presupposing anything at all. Moreover, the history of philosophical theology clearly shows that when philosophical strategies are unable to respect these originating religious convictions, what results is a forced option between a pietism bereft of the critical philosophical edge which theological skills demand (as “faith seeking understanding”) or an atheism triggered by the failure of philosophy to rise to a properly divine *theos*.

### *Implications for Ethics*

The chasm between medieval and modern thought regarding human freedom turns on whether one regards free human actions as at root responses or initiatives. In a crude sense, the difference could be marked by contrasting Plato’s account with Aristotle’s, where Plato insisted on human understanding as drawn to “the good” with human actions deriving from that inbuilt orientation, whereas Aristotle insisted that free human agents be themselves the initiators of their actions, to assure proper responsibility: “the buck stops here.” Yet the closer we regard Aristotle in most matters, the more we see his accounts beholden to Plato, and this one is no exception: he endorses at the outset of his *Nichomachean Ethics* the Platonic axiom that “every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good” (EN 1094a1). Augustine will profit from

the revelation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to ground Plato's pervasive *eros* in the originating intention of the creator: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." In fact, initiative as such holds little merit for Augustine, who opposes the senseless initiative of his boyhood escapades to a schooling of desire by way of "spiritual exercises." In fact, as the work of Pierre Hadot allows us to see, his gradual predilection for Christianity over Platonism had precisely to do with the kind and quality of practices which each recommended as way of guiding human beings to what is true.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas will utilize Aristotle's account, yet proceed to embed it within an immediate relation to a creator who not only inscribes the generic response in all rational creatures but activates it as well. That will allow him to give an account of our purported self-determination in a way which relies on the tendencies built into created natures and also identifies the initiator of willing with the free originator of all that is. Such an account allows free creatures to be initiators in the sense of discerning this rather than that as more consonant with the original orientation, while reserving the activating power to God. This results in an elucidation of the doctrine of creation within the realm of willing, finding in free creatures traces of the creator which ordinarily would not appear.

Indeed, Aquinas meets the concern of objectors, who sense that one who is so moved could not really be free, by recalling the founding relation of creature to creator: while "the very meaning of voluntary activity denotes an internal principle within the subject, this ... does not have to be the utterly first principle, moving yet unmoved by all else. The proximate principle is internal, but the ultimately first principle is external, as indeed it is for natural movement, this being the cause setting nature in motion" (ST 1-2.9.4.1). The implicit reference to Aristotle's "unmoved mover" is more by way of illustration than explication, of course, since the creator is far more than that. Yet by way of commentary on the use of "external [mover]" here, he acknowledges in another context that "to be moved voluntarily is to be moved of one's own accord, i.e., from a resource within. That inner resource, however, may derive from some other, outward source. In this sense there is no contradiction between being moved of one's own accord and being moved by another" (ST 1.105.4.2). Yet that "other" is limited to the One, the unique source of all: "God alone can really induce a change of this kind in the will" (ST 1.111.2); that is, move it freely in such a way that it moves itself. Moreover, since God is the creator of all, bestowing the *esse* which "is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else" (ST 1.8.1), such a One can only be called "external" to the creature in the unique sense determined by the *distinction* of creature from creator. So the free actions which creatures perform will correspond to Aristotle's demand that they be self-movers, but not ultimately so, for each is moved by the ultimate Good in such a way that a free action will be a discriminating response to the draw of God. Roderick Chisholm's assertion (in his 1964 Lindley lecture) dramatizes the crucial difference in horizons from Aquinas: "if we are responsible, ... then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved."<sup>21</sup> Unless, that is, our freedom and responsibility be that of creatures of a free creator.

We can use the same lecture to introduce the next interlocutor in our narrative of human freedom, as Chisholm invokes "another pair of medieval terms [to] say that the metaphysical problem of freedom does not concern the *actus imperatus*; it does not concern the question whether we are free to accomplish whatever it is that we will or set out to do; it concerns the *actus elicited*, the question whether we are free to will or to set out to do those things that we do will or set out to do" (*ibid*). Here freedom, as embedded in a classical horizon reinforced by a doctrine of creation, where the origin of willing—the Good—motivates all human actions, making of each an *actus imperatus*, is contrasted with an "unfettered" freedom whereby the act emerges spontaneously within each free agent: Scotus' *actus elicited*. The proximate source of this distinction seems to have been the condemnations of 1277, which may have motivated John Duns Scotus to attempt to establish *will* as an agent in its own right, independent of the intellect whose counsel it needs. Scotus thereby sought to enshrine human freedom in a self-moving faculty—the will—which could itself "elicit" acts. Effectively separated from "outside" influences, like discernment, human responsibility was secured by making the will a first mover. Yet its effect was also to remove freedom from its creaturely context and so set the stage for modernity and Kant's particular way of insisting that "only wills can be good." We can see how this separation occurred by contrasting Scotus' account with that of Thomas Aquinas, whom he often criticized. Where Aquinas considers *will* in the line of nature, Scotus opposes the freedom of will to the necessity of nature; where Aquinas expounds willing by analogy with reasoning and relies on the complementarity of these parallel intellectual faculties to construct the dynamics of willing as a moved movement, Scotus gives manifest priority to will as an unmoved (or "autonomous") mover. What separates them, as we have noted, is a diverse set of preoccupations, proximate among which must be counted the condemnations of 1277, which arose in part because some were not as careful as Aquinas in explicating the intellect's relation to willing.<sup>22</sup> Yet they divide even more, it seems, on their way of conceiving the relation of creature to its creator.

With regard to our relation to God as our creator, Aquinas had found Aristotle's conception of natures with inbuilt aims to be a useful conceptual tool for elaborating the activity of intentional beings, now created in the image of their maker, whose natures would be oriented to that same One as their goal, yet that goal would only be realized through their free activity. (This activity will become even more intentionally a *response* in the light of the freely initiated relationship identified with divine grace.) Moreover, the Aristotelian principle, "whatever is in motion is moved by another," offered Aquinas a way of showing how the dependence of such beings on the One originating them could be incorporated into that very activity: the inbuilt orientation together with the initial "specification" of the will by that One to "the good" accounts for the will's ability to originate activity, without however determining the outcome of any choice. For the "comprehensive good" is not itself something chosen; whatever is chosen will be a means to this or lesser ends subordinate to it. And even in these choices, while the will may be specified (or "informed") by what one perceives

to be best for one, the action itself flows from the action of the will: so “for Aquinas as well as for Scotus, there are no *sufficient* conditions of the choice antecedent to the choice itself.”<sup>23</sup> Yet that activity will always be conceived, for Aquinas, as the activity of a *creature* in the manner we have sketched; whereas for Scotus, it will be affirmed to be such, but conceived as the activity of a being endowed with a capacity to originate activity, which enables it to “co-operate” with the divine will in a fully free act, which would direct it to its true end.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the notion of cooperation (or “concurrency”) represents Scotus’ mature position on the relation of intellect and will in producing a free act, with the intellect (as a “natural agent”) subordinated to the inherently free activity of the will “to elicit an act.”<sup>25</sup> And once the created agent is deemed to be autonomous, precisely to guarantee its capacity of initiation, then creature and creator will also be conceived in parallel, the divine activity will be termed “*concursus*,” and the stage is set for a zero-sum game in which one protagonist’s gain is the other’s loss. We have seen how such a perspective fails to incorporate the unique founding relation, creation, which seems best elucidated by a metaphysics which can understand *act* analogously and thereby indicate how the originating activity of the creator continues to make the creature to be an agent in its own right. Aquinas puts this elegantly when he transforms the emanation scheme to schematize the providential care of a free creator: “divine providence works through intermediaries ..., not through any impotence on [God’s] part, but from the abundance of [divine] goodness imparting to creatures also the dignity of causing” (ST 1.22.3).

Kant completed the reversal Scotus began, when he so opposed freedom to desire that *eros* came to be seen as inhibiting free actions rather than identified as their source. How could our actions be genuinely *free*—read “autonomous”—if they originated in a response? Would not that make them *heteronomous*? We must also realize, of course, how Kant was constrained to move within an entirely different world, since once Scotus had effectively “detach[ed] the will from the lure of the good, ... Christian virtue itself was being redefined as obedience to authority, just as faith itself became defined as a set of propositions.”<sup>26</sup> So Kant needed to find a source of good actions more interior than responding to a divine command, especially since the divine had become another entity subsisting alongside the universe, as David Braine has noted. So the makings of the distinctively modern (or “libertarian”) notion of freedom begin to accumulate.<sup>27</sup> The autonomous *actus elicitus* becomes understood as “the ability to do otherwise” in the *very acting itself*, so nothing can “determine” the act but the actor whose act alone it is. Indeed, to be *free*, on such an account, the action itself must possess an “off/on” indeterminacy *decided* by the agent in performing the act. Sympathetic critics like Eleonore Stump have asked whether such a notion is pragmatically coherent—could a mother really have done otherwise than *not* slit her child’s throat?—so what is at stake is a conception of the acting self.<sup>28</sup> A contextual account of created human action like Aquinas’ also allows that creatures are capable of an utterly initiatory role, but in the terms of that account, it will not be one of acting but of failing to act: of “refusing” to enter into the process initiated by actively willing “the good.” Such an act, however, defines *sin* rather than offers the paradigm of

a free action for Aquinas, who would agree with Chisholm that we can indeed be "like unto God," but only in a self-destructive sense. Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* offers a belated witness to the classical paradigm in defining the self as a *relating*: to itself, indeed, but when fully realized—that is, "when despair is completely eradicated, ... the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it." At the end of the work, he cannily notes that this formula for a realized self is also the "definition of faith," as he has elaborated the radical freedom of a disrelated self as "the despair of defiance, or *offense*."<sup>29</sup> The crucial turning point in this narrative, as we have suggested, lies with Scotus, whose separation of *will* from *intellect* upset the delicate balance in Aquinas' account, for whom will is ever the intellectual appetite.<sup>30</sup> So both intellect and will, if you will, are operative in any action, whereas on Scotus' account it is *will* which does it, while consulting *intellect*, precisely to preserve that human initiative which would come to be assimilated to *autonomy*. Whereas on the classical account, bolstered by the background metaphysics of an intentional creator, desire animates throughout as intellect discriminates, and *good* reigns supreme as what alone elicits a free response.

It is critical to the Abrahamic traditions, of course, that following the Torah, Jesus, or the "straight path" of the Qur'an *not* be adjudged "heteronomous" behavior, so each of the traditions must assert the revealed Word of God to be the eternal pattern according to which the universe is made, so that responding to its historical revelation is a return to one's origins. The unsung hero of our story, however, is the only one who succeeded in singing that account: Dante. For his way of redeeming human desire by discovering its poetic modulation in his love for Beatrice allowed him to image sin itself as the absence of desire: Satan forever encased in a block of ice, the very negation of *eros*; whereas his Puritan look-alike, Milton, mirrored Kant's bifurcation by rendering the very center of hell as a raging fire: desire uncontrolled! Could it be that the seventeenth century failed to image *evil/sin* as the utter privation of *good* (including the good of *eros*/passion) because its theologians had failed to render "the distinction" adequately? For if God could no longer be presented as the creating Good, "to whom it is proper to be in all things, and intimately so" (ST 1.8.1), but had to be pictured as an *other* being, over against creation and thereby transcending it, there could be no analogous divine presence in our human striving (*eros*), but rather the "otherness" of the divine will which one could obey only by resisting such this-worldly yearnings. The absence of a *participated esse* as the ground and source of all authentic action would make any action's authenticity extrinsic to the act rather than its natural outcome: only by adhering to an extrinsic divine will embodied in a covenant freely bestowed could one escape the snares of passion or *eros*.

A frightening picture, certainly, setting the stage for Kant's *autonomy* to be subverted by Freud's *gratification*, and freedom's becoming what it has become in our time: "doing what I wanna do," quite oblivious of Socrates' patent analysis of "wanna" as the most telling example of bondage to parts of ourselves that in fact resist "the good" by escaping the rule of *logos*. Freedom as "self-gratification" and hence leading (as Freud himself realized) to death rather than to the possibility of a transformed life, represents



the final irony of Kant's attempt to formulate an autonomous self. For however noble his intentions may have been: to bring faith in a creator and redeemer back in by another door; it was the *ersatz* lure of an autonomous self which prevailed for modernity, leading ineluctably (as we see on all sides) to the no-self of post-modernity. Can there be a happier way to tell this story? Is a world without a creator—once our vista has been opened to imagine one—inescapably condemned to nihilism? Or are we able to grab the nettle presented here, and move through this "nihilism" to a fresh *theological* perspective?<sup>31</sup> In any case, if we are fated to be postmodern, then appreciating how it is that the modern perspective was expressly post-medieval should prepare us for many ways to render our post-(post-medieval) situation. Yet even if the two 'post's' should allow us to imagine retrieving some medieval perspectives, they cannot but be retrieved in a thoroughly post-modern fashion!<sup>32</sup>

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## NOTES

1. For an example of this contrast, see William Lane Craig: "Aquinas on God's Knowledge of Future Contingents" *Thomist* 54 (1990), 33-79; and my response: "God's Knowledge of Future Contingents: A Reply to William Lane Craig" *Thomist* 58 (1994), 317-22.

2. For a discussion aimed at restoring rhetorical argument to an indispensable place in comparative inquiry, see John Milbank's discussion of proposals of Alasdair MacIntyre, in Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); on "our intuitions" see Jaako Hintikka, "Emperor's New Intuitions," *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), 127-47.

3. *God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982/Washington DC., Catholic University of America Press, 1993)19.

4. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Vatican City: Library Edit rice Vatican, 1998) #49.

5. I have argued, in John Drummond and James Hart, eds., *The Truthful and the Good* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), that what Sokolowski presents as "the Christian distinction" can fruitfully be "celebrated and expanded" to each of the Abrahamic faiths (191-206).

6. *Sickness unto Death*, tr. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1989).

7. ST 1.13.5, see Herbert McCabe's Appendix 3 in the Blackfriars' edition (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964): "Signifying Imperfectly," 104-5.

8. In *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

9. See my "Essence and Existence: Avicenna and Greek Philosophy, MIDEO (=Mélanges Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales [Cairo]) 17 (1986), 53-66, as well as Harm Goris' account of the difference between Avicenna's and Aquinas' way of putting "the distinction," in his *Free Creatures of an Eternal God* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996) 289-303.

10. This has been the burden of Barry Miller's work over the years, culminating in his two recent volumes: *From Existence to God* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and *A Most Unlikely God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

11. For an alternative, see Peter Van Inwagen, "Meta-Ontology," *Erkenntnis* 48 (1998), 233-50.

12. In *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a non-Dualist Christian* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1991) 35-36; see p. 22 for observations on "non-dualism in action at the level of ordinary life" which parallel Sokolowski's observations of the ways in which "the distinction" is "lived in Christian life" (23).

13. This has been explored admirably in Rudi teVelde's *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

14. See my exchange with Tom Flint in *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 112, esp. note 33.

15. Kathryn Tanner develops a sense of transcendence that is expressly "non-contrastive," illustrating that suggestive category though the history of some key questions in philosophical theology, in her *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

16. See my *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) 86-91.

17. As in William Hasker's treatment of the issues in his *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

18. I am grateful to a reader's report which asked for more balance here, reminding us that "it is precisely this freedom of creation that leads theists to speak of God and the universe as two distinct beings." Indeed. Yet the very grammar of that discourse—"two distinct beings"—can easily lull one into thinking of God as another being in the universe; balance works both ways!

19. Harm Goris, *Free Creatures ...* (note 9).

20. For an illuminating introduction to the work of Pierre Hadot, See Arnold Davidson's translation and collection of some key articles: *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

21. Reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 32.

22. I am indebted to Joseph Incandela for this observation. On the condemnations of 1277, see. Roland Hissette, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 mars 1277* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1977).

23. Patrick Lee, "The Relation between Intellect and Will in Free Choice according to Aquinas and Scotus," *Thomist* 49 (1985) 341.

24. William Frank, "Duns Scotus on Autonomous Freedom and Divine Co-causality," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992) 142-64.

25. Patrick Lee (note 19) 322-26, citing C. Balic, "Une question inédite de J. Duns Scot sur la volonté," *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 3 (1931) 191-208, at 203; see Frank (note 20), where "co-causality" is distinguished from instrumentality.

26. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 136, 151. These solitary references hardly express the extent of my indebtedness to this remarkable book, which Nathan Mitchell and I have reviewed for the liturgical periodical, *Worship*.

27. Tom Flint feels that "libertarian" accounts can be salvaged in the direction of respecting "divine influence," making it "more accurate to think of our free actions as ... responses to divine initiatives" (*Divine Providence: the Molinist Account* [Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998] 33-34); whereas this paper argues that the climate native to libertarian accounts leads them to insist that free agents must be autonomous in the sense of initiators, for that climate was designed precisely to avoid creation.

28. Eleonore Stump, "Intellect, Will, and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities," in Michael Beatty, ed., *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 254-85.

29. *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, by Anti-Climacus; edited by S Kierkegaard (tr. Alastair Hannay) (New York: Penguin, 1989) 44, 146-65.

30. See Mary Clark's incisive account of the critical interaction of intellect and will in a person's willing to do something, in the festschrift for Arthur Hyman: Ruth Link-Salinger et al., eds., *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989).

31. This is the thesis of Gianni Vattimo, in his *Beyond Interpretation: the Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* tr. David Webb (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

32. Special thanks to my colleagues, Peter Van Inwagen, Michael Kremer, and Dean Zimmerman, for their reflections following an initial presentation at our Notre Dame Philosophy Colloquium.